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ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

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# Robert M. La Follette and Wisconsin Progressivism

James I. Clark

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

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by

James I. Clark

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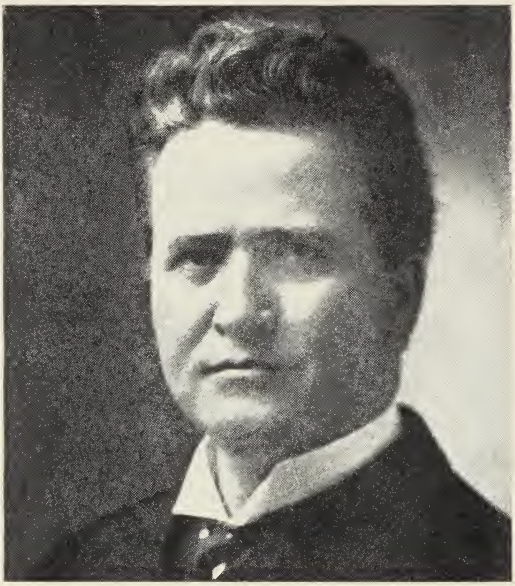
# Robert M. La Follette and Wisconsin Progressivism

*by*

JAMES I. CLARK



Robert M. La Follette as Governor.

PEOPLE CAME from miles around to hear him. He spoke on street corners, from a farm wagon in front of the grandstand at county fairs, from lecture platforms. His strong words and perfectly timed gestures expressed disgust, despair, anger, honor, hope; but he backed his arguments with cold, hard facts. He gave his listeners an education in government and democracy—and he made them think. Hammering home his logic, point by point, he carried audiences word for word right to the end, maybe one, maybe four hours later. Then,

> Near the conclusion of his speech as he folds his arms across his chest with the air of a man who has done all that can be done, and in a quiet and impressive way delivers his peroration, there is a wonderful change. . . . You realize that he has been speaking for a long time. He has tired you but you did not know it before. However, he does not seem to have become weary himself. As he bows for the last time and withdraws

he seems as fresh as ever. You are impressed with the belief that the man is a sort of steam engine. He is iron in the sense that iron conveys the idea of endurance.[1]

That bundle of driving, relentless energy was "Fighting Bob" La Follette, Progressive Republican, reform politician. He was out to make some changes in Wisconsin. Before he finished, he made quite a few.

Robert M. La Follette challenged regular Republican leaders for control of the Wisconsin party. He spoke all over the state, built up a strong political organization and campaigned for the governorship. He won his fight in 1900 when he was elected by over 100,000 votes, and became the first Wisconsin-born man to hold the important office.

## The Background

By then La Follette had been in politics for over twenty years. He had graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1879, and the next year took a law degree. Then he decided to run for district attorney of Dane County, without first consulting Republican leaders.

Elisha Keyes, Madison postmaster and local Republican boss, had other ideas. He called the young lawyer in and told him things weren't done that way. There would be a Republican district attorney next term but his name wasn't La Follette. He advised the young man to go to work and learn a few things about politics.

Keyes misjudged his man. His advice was ignored. La Follette went directly to the voters. He formed a group of workers, got plenty of popular support, and by convention time had the nomination well in hand. After that, election was easy. He did it again two years later.

By 1884 this newcomer to Wisconsin politics controlled enough votes in the state convention to be nominated for a seat in the House of Representatives. There he served three terms.

Congressman La Follette was not Fighting Bob, the reform politician. He got out of harness occasionally, however. He helped defeat a bill granting some western Indian lands to railroads—a bill that would have been very profitable to the lines concerned. He also differed with Senator Philetus Sawyer, wealthy Oshkosh lumberman, over opening some Menominee Indian timber to lumber interests in Wisconsin. Party leaders overlooked those few shortcomings, figuring La Follette would get educated eventually. His speaking ability and capacity for hard work were tremendous party assets. He would go far if he stayed in line.

The 1890 Wisconsin Democratic landslide retired La Follette to private law practice in Madison. Then the Democrats indirectly put him back into politics.

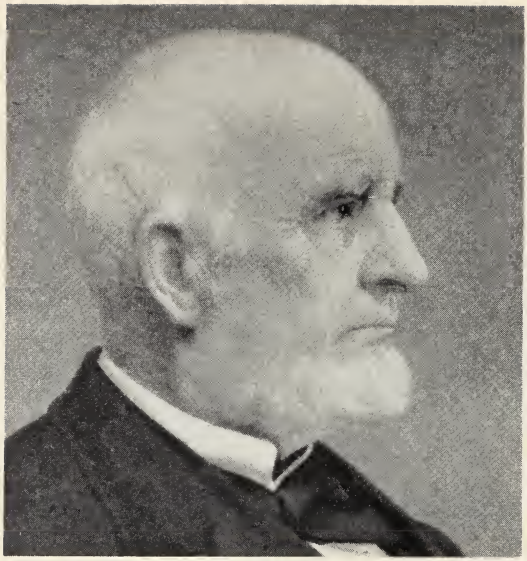
For several years Wisconsin State Treasurers had been allowed to pocket part of the interest collected on public money they deposited in various banks. It happened that most former treasurers were Republicans, and the Democrats decided to sue and recover the money.

Philetus Sawyer had given bond for some treasurers and he would be out about $300,000 if they lost their cases. He figured La Follette might be a man to help.

The crowd gathers . . .

La Follette warms up . . .

He scores a point.



Philetus Sawyer

The two met in a Milwaukee hotel. Sawyer offered La Follette some money. He later said he had merely wanted to hire legal talent to represent him in the coming trial. La Follette had a different story.

It happened that the treasury suits were to be heard by Judge Robert G. Siebecker, La Follette's brother-in-law and former law partner. La Follette, claiming he had been offered a bribe, was outraged. Sawyer insisted he hadn't known Siebecker and La Follette were related. There had been no witnesses—it was one man's word against the other's.

As far as La Follette was concerned the incident demonstrated just how far a political boss would go to have his way, and his dislike for bosses went back to when he had run for district attorney. He refused to have anything more to do with Sawyer and gave the story to the newspapers.

A different judge took the case and Sawyer eventually had to pay about $160,000. That didn't please the Oshkosh lumberman, and he had no use for La Follette after that.

"Nothing else ever came into my life that exerted such a powerful influence on me as that affair," La Follette later wrote. "It was the turning point, in a way, of my career."[2]

It was a turning point in Wisconsin politics too. From then on La Follette declared open season on bosses and the regular party machine. He set out to get elected governor.

## 19th Century America

That experience with Sawyer, according to La Follette, set him thinking about the state of democratic government. Looking back, he could see how during his Congressional years it had appeared that most of the lawmakers and indeed most of the public looked upon Congress

and the government as a means of getting some sort of advantage for themselves or for their home towns or home states. River and harbor improvements without merit, public buildings without limit, raids upon the public lands and forests, subsidies and tariffs, very largely occupied the attention of Congressmen. Lobbyists for all manner of private interests, especially the railroads, crowded the corridors of the capital and the Washington hotels and not only argued for favorable legislation, but demanded it.[3]

Those years have since been known as the age of big business. From the Civil War to 1900 the frontier was pushed to the Pacific, railroads crisscrossed the continent, natural resources were tapped on a grand scale and used to build cities and make the country, and some individuals in it, very rich.

*Laissez faire*, the theory that government should not interfere with business, was accepted by most people. Survival of the fittest, the race goes to the strong, the rags-to-riches dream, were also accepted by most of the general public.

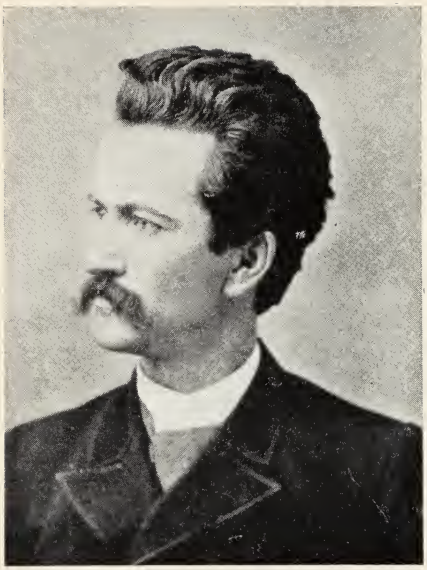
To help the fittest survive, and the strong to win the race, friendly governments were necessary. The best government aided business the most and controlled it the least. To have that sort of government the "right" men had to be elected. Political control was exercised by party leaders through the convention system, by which candidates were nominated for office. Voters chose delegates to county conventions, where delegates to state conventions were selected. State and federal candidates were nominated at state meets, and delegates chosen to help nominate presidents. The voter was somewhat removed from the final selection of candidates. He merely chose the party he wished to support. Republicans and Democrats both nominated the same way.[4]

## Voices of Protest

Although governments did a lot for business, the farmer and the laboring man weren't completely forgotten. During the post-Civil War period postage prices were reduced, homestead laws passed, imprisonment for debt abolished, lotteries outlawed, bank inspection laws passed, and in many states the labor blacklist was ruled out. A Department of Agriculture was created, Labor Day became a national holiday, and the public school system was extended and strengthened.

Yet farmers and laborers weren't entirely satisfied. The seventy-two hour factory week was still the rule, and pay was usually something under five dollars a week. Women and children worked long hours for less than that. Industrial accidents took a fearful toll of life and limb. Courts unfriendly to labor were generous with anti-strike injunctions and Congress and most state governments usually deaf to pleas for better working conditions and strike protection laws.

Small farmers in the West and South had a number of complaints. Prices were too low, railroad freight rates too high. Grain elevator companies bought wheat as number two grade and sold it as number one. Credit was tight and loans controlled by Eastern bankers. By 1896 wheat



La Follette in 1884.

was forty cents a bushel, eggs six cents a dozen, and butter eight cents a pound. Farmers felt it was time for a change. Many of them voted for Democrat William Jennings Bryan that year, and had supported Grangers, Greenbackers and Populists in the past.

Protests against unrestrained big business came from other quarters. Men trained in social science research techniques were coming out of universities and taking new looks at American society. Their conclusions didn't jibe with a few popular notions of the time.

Sociologists like Lester Frank Ward and Edward A. Ross, for example, reasoned that the theory of survival of the fittest didn't apply to man, as it did to animals, who couldn't think. Man could build any kind of society he wanted; he wasn't a slave to "natural laws" of economics, politics and society. With the frontier closing, cities growing larger, the nation becoming more industrialized, many social problems too big for the individual to solve alone had been created. Governments, these men thought, should be agencies through which such problems could be attacked collectively, agencies for social and economic progress, not merely ones to do the bidding of the strongest lobby.

Economists like Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons made many contributions to the study and solution of social problems created by an industrial society. Ely evolved the idea of "ethical economics," arguing that the men who owned or controlled materials or factories had certain social responsibilities toward those who worked for or bought from them, as well as responsibilities to their stockholders. Commons advocated social responsibility for capitalism also, and did much pioneer work in labor relations. These men, like Ross, later taught at the University of Wisconsin. They were influential in bringing about a number of changes in the state.

Educational theory also underwent change. Psychologists like William James and philosophers like John Dewey favored an education that developed social spirit, or social consciousness, rather than one that produced people who followed what they considered the "dog eat dog" policies of *laissez faire*.[5]

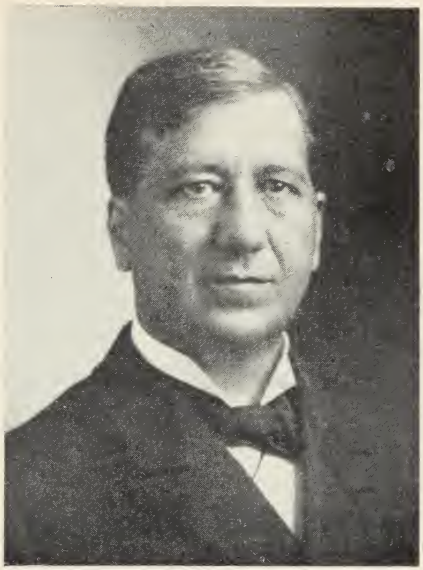
These scholars didn't want to destroy capitalism, for America had made and would make great progress under the capitalistic system. Yet they felt the complete control of government and the economy by big

business provided wealth and benefits for only a few, and caused a great waste of natural and human resources. With intelligent planning, they thought, many more people could benefit from the country's vast resources. These men wanted to bring capitalism under popular control. The only way they could see to do that was through a stronger, more representative government, controlled by a democratic people. Such scholars provided reform politicians with ideas and factual ammunition. La Follette was to make use of many of the ideas in working reforms in Wisconsin.

Popular writers like Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffans and Samuel Hopkins Adams—later called "muckrakers"—turned out magazine articles directing public attention to the harmful effects of monopolies and political bosses. They wrote about Standard Oil, graft and corruption in cities and states, and about the need for pure food laws to protect those who bought canned and preserved food. They had many readers, and during the late 19th and early 20th centuries curbing monopoly and reforming governments became very popular topics.

## The Wisconsin Scene

Wisconsinites read dime magazines, and the state had its share of government for business too. Politically the state was under close conservative control. Philetus Sawyer, John C. Spooner and Henry C. Payne in the United States Senate, and various bosses like Madison's Elisha Keyes made certain the right people got elected to state and federal offices. By providing state and federal jobs, free passes and rebates from



Robert G. Siebecker.

railroads, veterans' pensions, river and harbor bills, Republicans, railroads and lumbermen kept a tight rein on Wisconsin. Democrats were no different; they didn't make any significant changes during the few years they held state offices.

Wisconsin was still an agricultural state, although her farmers had problems a little different from those further west, who depended more on a single crop such as wheat. The shift to diversified farming and dairying since 1870 had given Wisconsin agriculture more balance; there were more sources of income for farmers. Although support was occasionally given third parties such as the Grangers and Greenbackers, farmers usually remained regular Republicans.

There was a common grudge against railroads, dating from the Panic of 1857, when so many farms were lost from investments in railroads that went bankrupt. In 1874 a

Granger legislature and a Democratic governor combined to pass the Potter law, regulating railroad rates. The next legislature was more friendly to railroads, however, and the law was repealed. At the same time, prices started up as the depression which began in 1873 wore off, and there were fewer complaints about shipping costs and railroad service.

Wisconsin dairy farmers were mainly interested in protection against substitutes such as oleomargarine, lower taxes and tariffs, and lower production costs. If they got those things they would probably have been satisfied.

Yet taxes were not lowered, and what dairymen considered adequate protection wasn't obtained. Tariffs generally went up, not down. By 1894 Wiliam D. Hoard, former Republican governor and editor of *Hoard's Dairyman,* was urging Wisconsin farmers to get into politics. When they discovered that Senator Henry C. Payne was an oleo lobbyist in Washington, dairymen began to take Hoard's advice.

Robert M. La Follette had been born and raised on a farm in Primrose, Dane County. He knew farmers and their problems. He knew how to talk with them. Many of them helped elect him district attorney and to Congress. Now he would go to them for aid to gain control of the state Republican party.

In 1894 La Follette persuaded Congressman Nils Haugen to stand as anti-machine candidate for the governor nomination. It didn't work out, and Haugen was out of a political job.

In 1896 and 1898 La Follette tried himself. Each time he went to the convention, after extensive speaking tours about the state, convinced that he had a large number of delegates ready to support him. Each time they faded at the crucial moment. Although at both conventions La Follette had a plurality of delegates, he lacked a majority. Regular party leaders were able to turn delegates from him to a conservative candidate, and also swung support from unpledged delegations.

The 1896 and 1898 nominations went to Edward Scofield, who served two terms as governor. La Follette didn't break with the party, however. He campaigned vigorously for Scofield and for the 1896 Presidential candidate, William McKinley.[6]

## The Direct Primary and Railroad Taxes

Still, he didn't give up his reform ideas or his plans to become governor of Wisconsin. In his speeches at county fairs, on the Chautauqua circuit where he took engagements to earn money to continue campaigning and to support his family, and at farmers' meetings and institutes, he hammered on two issues: the direct primary and railroad taxation.

La Follette was convinced that he had gone into two conventions the popular Republican choice for governor. Party leaders, he felt, had gone against the people's wishes by denying him the nomination. As long as the convention system remained leaders could nominate anyone they wanted, regardless of how the people felt. That system should be abolished, La Follette thought, and the public given direct control in nominating

candidates through the primary election, thereby having a greater voice in government.

Under a direct primary set-up a prospective candidate would have to get a certain number of signatures on a petition. Then his name would be placed on the ballot under the party he represented, along with others who wanted to run for that particular office. Before the general November election the voters would choose the men they wanted to represent their party.

Such a process took time, it required self-advertising, and it might be rather expensive for the office-seeking individual. It would give the people a more direct voice in their government, although its success depended on an interested and informed citizenry.

Along with that idea, La Follette thought Wisconsin railroads should pay a greater share of the cost of government. At that time railroad taxes were figured as a certain percentage of gross earnings. As only railroad officials knew what the lines earned, in effect they made their own tax assessments. An 1899 study showed that railroads in the state returned only about half as much in taxes as did equally valuable property owned by private individuals.[7]

Railroads had long had enough influence in the legislature to keep taxes low. Isaac Stephenson, wealthy Marinette lumberman who had been closely associated with railroads for many years, told how many railroad lobbyists

> had headquarters in the Vilas House, the most important hotel, and the effects of their activities upon the work of the legislature were obvious. By the distribution of passes and granting of favors here and there throughout the state, this system had been maintained for nearly forty years; and in time the railroads became so thoroughly entrenched that they regarded their position as impregnable. . . . The boast was made by one of their chief lobbyists that no bill had passed for sixteen years without their approval, and I believe he was right in this assertion.[8]

John C. Spooner

That situation would be changed if La Follette had his way. He would tax all railroads on an *ad valorum* basis—according to their property values, the way other property owners were taxed. He also wanted the state to have power to evaluate railroad property.

Governor Scofield was interested in tax reforms too, but advocated equalization among taxpayers, not increases. A temporary commission



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had been set up in 1897 to study the entire problem and two years later the legislature placed *ad valorum* taxes on sleeping car companies, freight lines and equipment companies. Thus conservative Republicans had made a start, although La Follette felt there was much more to be done.[9]

## La Follette Becomes Governor

In 1900 La Follette's campaign tactics changed. He didn't give up reform, but the blows he struck were softer than they had been. He had continued to gain popular support, but still had to get by the nominating convention. He had to make peace with party leaders and their supporters, among which were railroad companies.

He met with railroad officials and assured them that he only wanted them to pay a fair share of taxes. He made overtures to party leaders. Railroad men were satisfied and many of the conservatives in the party came over to La Follette. Isaac Stephenson, long a heavy contributor to the party, went over to the new leader and took his purse with him. Others fell into line. The "harmony campaign" was under way.

By convention time La Follette had plenty of delegates. His campaign pledges became the party platform and he was nominated by acclamation. Progressive Republicans took over Wisconsin, although conservatives and La Follette men interpreted the event differently. Regular party men thought they had read the signs. La Follette had strong voter support and couldn't be sidetracked again. Perhaps they figured he could be controlled later. Once he became governor he would be open to the give and take of party politics when it came to passing legislation.

Had those men possessed the wisdom of Elisha Keyes they might have read the signs differently. Wrote Keyes of the 1900 convention:

> This convention is noted for the comparative absence of the old leaders save such as have identified themselves fully with the new element which has come into control of the party. A new cult has arisen and has forced its way to the front. Never before were so many new faces seen in a republican state convention in Wisconsin. The majority are young men whose enthusiasm has taken the place of experience. Time will show whether such a radical change in control of the party is wise or unwise. It is sufficient to say that it is all the result of a popular movement throughout the state.

Those enthusiastic young men were to make many changes in Wisconsin. Their influence was to be felt throughout the land. Things were not to be the same as they had been when men like Keyes had held the party reins.[10]

## Defeat, and Then Success

The direct primary and railroad tax reforms were presented to the 1901 legislature. When conservatives discovered that the governor treated campaign pledges as promises to be fulfilled, harmony disappeared. La Follette had slight success with his progressive legislation. The legislature passed a direct primary law, limited to village and county elections, and La Follette returned that with a blistering veto. On railroad

taxation there wasn't even an unacceptable bill to turn down.

By now Republican ranks were badly split. "Stalwarts"—the conservatives—organized to defeat all reform measures, then and later. "Halfbreeds"—La Follette men—led the attack for progressive reforms.

Direct primary and railroad tax defeats made excellent campaign material in 1902. In his speeches at county fairs and farmers' meeting, La Follette hammered on those themes. He read the roll of Assemblymen and Senators who had voted against those bills, and boosted "fair-minded" Democrats who had supported them. He urged election of Progressive Republicans to help him carry out changes. To the primary and *ad valorum* taxes he added a third idea: a regulatory railroad commission.

" 'What good will it do you, anyhow,' a railroad man had once asked him, 'to increase railroad taxation? We can meet that all right just by raising rates or by changing a classification here and there. No one will know it and we can take back every cent of increased taxes in rates from the people.' "

La Follette was well aware of that. He wanted a state commission to evaluate railroad property, regulate rates and guard against unnecessary increases. When he talked about the need for a commission he had facts and figures to show how shippers in states where railroads were more tightly controlled paid lower rates than those in Wisconsin. He demonstrated how much money that meant from the pockets of each one of his many listeners.

Elisha Keyes

Robert M. La Follette got the nomination and was elected for a second term in 1902. This time he also got a legislature that would give him some help. The *ad valorum* tax bill passed, and the state got power to evaluate railroad property. As a result, tax receipts soon increased from about $600,000 to about $1.5 million. The direct primary was passed, but opponents tacked on a requirement for a popular referendum, to be held in the 1904 general election. By that time, they hoped, popular opinion could be turned against the law. La Follette failed to get his railroad commission law, and that was laid over as ammunition for another campaign.[11]

## The 1904 "Gymnasium Convention"

Wisconsin politics boiled to a climax in 1904. Stalwarts organized for a last-ditch fight against La Fol-

lette control. Halfbreeds were determined to sweep the party, give La Follette a third term, and firmly establish Progressivism in Wisconsin. Both sides felt that the outcome of the direct primary referendum depended on who controlled the state convention.

Conservative-Progressive contests in the county conventions were close, and some of them bitter. Both sides claimed a majority of pledged delegates. Two delegations came from some counties. Final pre-convention count gave La Follette 560 of the 1,065 delegates, but Stalwarts disagreed with that.

Delegates, party leaders and spectators descended upon Madison in the middle of May. All incoming trains were jammed; those leaving Milwaukee had to carry extra cars. Hotel space was so short that some city visitors had to spend the night in the local jail.

For townspeople it was carnival time. "Madison was wild as a March hare," said the *Wisconsin State Journal,* "and for hours pre-convention enthusiasm romped the streets. The weather was pleasant, and the report that a band concert would be given opposite the Park hotel brought the people out in throngs. It seemed that the city had been completely overturned and all its inhabitants dumped in that spot."

Politicians engaged in little fun or frolic. They merely worried. "All the hotel corridors present an animated appearance," reported the *State Journal.* "Doubt surrounds the outcome of the convention and even politicians supposed to be on the inside walk the streets asking questions in their looks."

All questions would be answered in the University of Wisconsin gymnasium, the convention hall. The State Central Committee settled the problem of contested delegates, and seated mostly La Follette men. Still, Progressive leaders feared a Stalwart attempt to "steal" the convention. Stalwarts, on the other hand, accused Progressives of stealing the convention by rigging the Central Committee. They wanted the whole convention to vote on the contested delegations.

On the morning of May 18 two hundred Stalwarts formed and marched to the gymnasium. La Follette said later he had anticipated such a move, figuring conservatives would try to take over the convention by sheer numbers on forged tickets. Hastily marking their own tickets so they could be recognized, La Follette men took an additional precaution. "We felt it necessary to protect the doorkeepers from being rushed and swept aside by a crowd of men not entitled to seats as delegates," La Follette wrote.

> So during the night before we had constructed at the delegates' entrance a barbed wire passage which would admit of the delegates entering only in single file. Stationed along the line of this fence we had twelve or fifteen of the old university football men . . . . So well was all this preliminary work arranged that the convention organized regularly and in the best of order.

The anti-La Follette Milwaukee *Sentinel* was very bitter: "Never before was there such a shameful display of brutality and disregard for the usual individual and public rights on

The University gymnasium and armory.

a similar occasion. . . . Even women, children and gray haired men were the same as the rest of the crowd to this worthy bunch; . . . these 'guardians of the sacred precincts of reform.' "

To the spectators inside the gymnasium the show was wonderful. Women sat in the balcony and counted row upon row of bald heads below, and wondered if the stress and strain of politics made men lose their hair. The ladies yelped with dismay when a fat man pushed his way to the aisle, crushing hats, falling over laps, stepping on toes, and elbowing women in the face. They watched one delegate, without food since early morning, consume two bags of peanuts, a box of cracker jack, two ham sandwiches, a glass of lemonade, and countless cigars.

University students hung from girders and windows. They whistled, cheered, clapped and sang:

Cheer! Boys, cheer! La Follette's got the ball!
U-rah-rah! Oh, won't they take a fall?
For when we hit their line they'll have no line at all!
There'll be a hot time in Wisconsin tonight!

La Follette had the ball all right, and so well had he organized, so well did the convention go for him, that the Stalwarts were hopelessly outvoted. At the end of the first day they stomped out and held their own convention at the Fuller Opera

Fuller Opera House. Later the Parkway Theatre, now the site of a Woolworth store.

House, thoughtfully reserved some time before.

The State Supreme Court later declared La Follette candidates official Republicans. Stalwarts then threw most of their support to Democrats.

In November La Follette and the direct primary were approved by 50,000 votes. Progressive reforms would now be expanded to include the railroad commission, laws regulating lobbying, a civil service system, a corrupt practices act, a state board of forestry, and others.[12]

## The University and the State

In writing those laws and forming commissions the state received considerable help from the University of Wisconsin. La Follette was the first Wisconsin graduate to become governor, and relations between the educational institution and the state government were close during his and other Progressive Republican administrations that followed.

University professors became active participants in organizing and administrating many reforms. In the classes of E. A. Ross, Richard Ely and others, graduate students examined state problems and gathered data useful to legislators. Professors themselves helped write the primary election and civil service laws, and helped organize an industrial and a highway commission. Several served on those bodies. A Saturday Lunch Club composed of state and university personnel was formed. Ideas were exchanged on a friendly, personal and direct basis.

Charles Van Hise, former classmate of La Follette's, became university president in 1903, and under

him the services and size of the institution greatly increased. The extension service grew larger, offering high school and college courses, lectures, and information of various kinds. Dairy and short courses and other services begun years before by the College of Agriculture multiplied in size and extent.[13]

## Legislative Reference Library

The state made use of other experts. One notable example was the Legislative Reference Library, set up by Charles McCarthy, a Wisconsin PhD. of 1901.

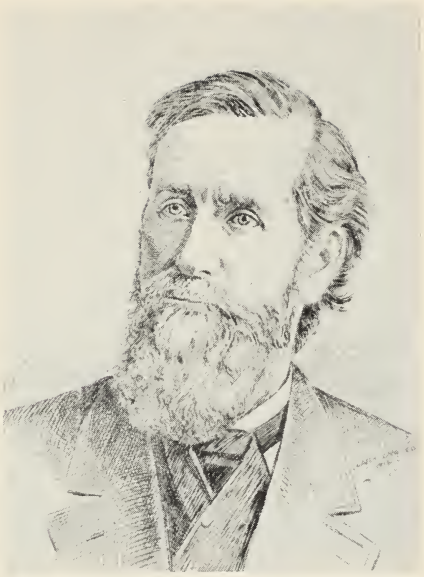
The library collected information relating to bills before the legislature and made it easily available. A clipping bureau was started to get material on any subject legislators wanted to know about.

The "bill drafting department" of the library probably received more public attention than any of its many services. That department took legislators' requests and drew up bills in the best legal form. It offered no suggestions or advice about the bills' contents—although it was accused of doing that. So impartial was the department that it even accepted an assignment from a conservative legislator to write a bill abolishing itself.

By 1910 fifteen states had copied the Legislative Reference Library idea. Even the federal government looked into it, and legislation was introduced in Congress to set up a library in Washington.[14]

## Progressivism After La Follette

The 1905 legislature elected La Follette to the Senate, to replace J. V. Quarles, whose term had expired. He delayed resigning the governorship until 1906, when his reform program was complete. Lt. Gov. James O. Davidson then took over, and La Follette continued his public service for another 19 years, carrying his fight for reform to the national level.



Isaac Stephenson

There had been factional fighting among Progressives in Wisconsin during La Follette's administrations, but after he left it became more intense. The movement had attracted a diverse group of young idealists, intellectuals, Scandinavians, farmers, and professional people, held together by the personality of Robert M. La Follette. The early movement had thrived on dramatic issues like railroads, bosses, the direct primary —issues that caught public attention and won votes. After some reforms had been attained, some people felt the movement had gone far enough;

the important changes had been made. Isaac Stephenson was one of those. Others, such as Francis McGovern, who became governor in 1910, wanted Progressivism to move more definitely toward the "service state," to broaden the influence of government in the affairs of people and try to solve more problems caused by an industrial society.

Wisconsin's way of handling modern governmental problems was outlined by Charles McCarthy in *The Wisconsin Idea,* published in 1912. The Wisconsin Idea called for the state, guided by sound research and careful experimentation, to act in the interests of the people to counterbalance the force of concentrated capital and industry. To accomplish that, commissions of highly trained experts would carry out many governmental functions and deal with problems as they came up, acting under broad powers granted by the legislature. The state wouldn't take over businesses and industries—as Socialists wanted—but would regulate them for the good, it was supposed, of all. Honest officials were needed to accomplish that program, and the people would keep them honest and efficient with the direct primary.

Labor problems were among the first attacked by McGovern's first administration. A workmen's compensation law was passed and an Industrial Accident Board set up. Woman and child labor laws were enacted. Hours of work were limited, minimum health and safety standards outlined and enforced. Some of these laws conflicted with court interpretations of personal freedom and employer's rights and had to be carefully written and in some cases rewritten.

With the establishment of a State Conservation Commission in 1911 efforts were made to regulate the use of water power by private industry and start a reforestation program. These laws, perhaps not as carefully drawn as they might have been, also ran into court opposition, and it was somewhat later before much statewide conservation work got under way in Wisconsin.

Life insurance companies came under regulatory laws and the office of Commissioner of Insurance was strengthened. In 1912 a Highway Commission was created and the first state aid highway legislation passed.

McGovern, like La Follette a University of Wisconsin graduate, made even greater use of university personnel. In 1911 forty-six people were serving both state and university. At the same time, university services continued to expand, and appropriations for that institution went up each year.

Commissions and their powers also increased and "government by commission" became a catch-phrase of the day. Opponents could argue that Progressivism had been sidetracked into something else. The original movement had been concerned with putting government into the people's hands through the direct primary. Yet by 1914 much government work was handled by commissions somewhat removed from public control, and the number of elected officials had been reduced from eight to five. Few would deny the need for trained personnel to handle tax, welfare, educational, industrial and labor prob-

lems, but many did complain about the power those commissions had over the lives of people. The rapid growth of bureaus resulted in some waste and inefficiency too.

Big government, much of it carried on by experts, was a national trend born of urbanization, industrial problems and social consciousness. In answer to critics of government by commission it could be said that Wisconsin was served by intelligent, conscientious personnel who did their jobs well. There were no problems of graft nor financial scandals. And regardless of its shortcomings, the direct primary did give people more control over their government than they had had under the convention system.

Although government was now doing things for groups other than big business only, people could and did complain about the cost. As state services increased, so did taxes. Highways, expanded university services, and salaries for more experts cost considerable money. In 1911 an income tax law was passed and added to the task of paying taxes was that of filling out forms.

By 1914 increased taxes, lack of dramatic La Follette type issues, and factional scrapping within the party brought conservatives back into control. Emmanuel Phillip, manufacturer of refrigerator cars, became governor.

Some services were halted, taxes reduced and university professors called on less often for advice. Yet the solid gains of 14 years of Progressive government remained. The direct primary, tax reforms, civil service, various commissions, labor laws, and the regulation of corporations persisted. World War I was to bring new industrial and agricultural problems and after the war Progressive Republicans would be returned to power.[15]

## Summing Up

Progressive reforms and government had come to Wisconsin at the time they had to other states, and the federal government. They were Wisconsin's answer to pressing problems of the day. The principles and reforms enunciated by Wisconsin Progressive Republicans were to be more thorough, more lasting, than in many other states. One reason probably lies in the thoroughness of research and experimentation instigated by La Follette himself, and in the educational program he carried on at county fairs, Chautauqua, and his *La Follette's Magazine,* founded in 1909 and continued for many years.

Another reason can be found in the calibre of men and the idealism that carried the program through in Wisconsin. University services and the cooperatoin between that institution and the state government also made for lasting reform. One was the laboratory, the other the proving ground where experiments and theory were tested and bore fruit.

Wisconsin Progressivism pioneered in solving many problems born of a changing society. Mistakes were made, some waste occurred. Yet with the insistence on sound, intelligent research, careful experimentation, and honest government, Progressives made many contributions, and made "The Wisconsin Idea" known throughout the land.

## NOTES

[1] Quoted from newspaper sources in Edward A. Doan, *The La Follettes and the Wisconsin Idea* (New York, 1947), 33.

[2] On early career, Robert M. La Follette, *Autobiography* (Madison, 1912), 3–175, quote p. 46; Belle Case and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (2 vols., New York, 1953), 1:1–135; Albert O. Barton, *La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin* (Madison, 1922), 2–32, 42–50; Richard N. Current, *Pine Logs and Politics, A Life of Philetus Sawyer* (Madison, 1950), 210–13, 236–69, 280–88.

[3] La Follette, *Autobiography,* 86.

[4] Russel B. Nye, *Midwestern Progressive Politics* (East Lansing, Michigan, 1951), 1–28.

[5] Background from *Ibid.*, 70–180.

[6] On Wisconsin politics, Robert S. Maxwell, The Rise of the Progressives in Wisconsin. Unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1949, 1–45; Barton, *La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin,* 51–138; La Follette, *Autobiography,* 135–224; Allen F. Lovejoy, *La Follette and the Establishment of the Direct Primary in Wisconsin* (New Haven, 1941), 9–22, 28–29.

[7] La Follette, *Autobiography,* 196–99, 243–46; Maxwell, Rise of the Progressives, 46–109; Lovejoy, *The Direct Primary,* 31–42.

[8] Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life* (Chicago, 1915), 213.

[9] Maxwell, Rise of the Progressives, 150–54; Emmanuel Phillip, *Political Reform in Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, 1910), 168–85.

[10] Barton, *La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin,* 137–64, quote p. 160.

[11] *Ibid.*, 165–286; La Follette, *Autobiography,* 225–318, quote p. 248.

[12] On 1904 campaign and convention, Barton, *La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin,* 287–415; La Follette *Autobiography,* 322–27, quote p. 323; Madison, *Wisconsin State Journal,* Milwaukee *Sentinel,* May 16, 17, 18, 19, 1904; Oshkosh *Northwestern,* May 16, 1904; Belle Case and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette,* 1:174–86.

[13] Maxwell, Rise of the Progressives, 223–70; Belle Case and Fola La Foleltte, *Robert M. La Follette,* 153–64; Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen, *The University of Wisconsin, A History* (2 vols., Madison, 1949), 2:3–122.

[14] Edward A. Fitzpatrick, *McCarthy of Wisconsin* (New York, 1944), 41–71.

[15] *Ibid.* 90–108, 175–276; Maxwell, Rise of the Progressives, 270–367; Frederic C. Howe, *Wisconsin, An Experiment in Democracy* (New York, 1912), 86–192; Charles McCarthy, *The Wisconsin Idea* (New York, 1912).

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